

HUMOR IN *VIVRE SA VIE*: GODARD'S SCHOOLBOY HUMOR

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CRITICS' ADVERSE REACTION TO GODARD'S WIT

Every film buff following Godard at the height of his popularity knew that Godard was U.S. critic John Simon's *bête noir*. Not every Godard lover knows, however, that ever since the release of *BREATHLESS*, Godard's films have consistently irritated French reviewers. Many critics in the French press attacked *BREATHLESS*. Those that liked the film usually expressed serious reservations about Godard's wit. In reviews that appeared in the French press at the time of the film's release, Raymond Borde was distressed that the public "fell" for *BREATHLESS*, an amateurish film full of gags. Georges Charensol decried the film's infantile plot and characterization. Jacques Chevallier found Godard weakest when "stealing" shots from others' films. Rene Cortarde wrote that *BREATHLESS* relied on "false audacity," foolish and vulgar characterization and acting, low humor, and irresponsible social and aesthetic rebellion. Pierre Marcabru defined the film as a comedy of manners which morally, in its characterization, derived from Nietzsche; similarly but with less high-flown analogies, Louis Marcorelles denounced *BREATHLESS* as an "irresponsible" film depicting a "world of immorality lived skindeep." Marcel Martin complained that the film mocked both the audience and all the rules of cinema. In the same vein, Louis Seguin complained not only about the male protagonist's "reprehensible politics" but also about the cinematic style, which pretentiously tried to convey life's "ambiguity and chaos" through wild camera movements and fabricated vivacity. [\(1\)](#)

Nonchalance, negligence, improvisation, vulgarity, pretentiousness, falseness, mannerism, subjectivity, tendentiousness, personal reference, tediousness, triteness, boredom, looseness, emptiness, detachment, pessimism, logorrhea, and intellectual abstractionsuch are the pejoratives lanced by French critics against Godard's *VIVRE SA VIE*, a film generally better received in France than *BREATHLESS*. Reviewers prized *VIVRE SA VIE*'s romanticism and seriousness but here, as throughout Godard's career, they consistently held to Godard to task for one major fault--infantile humor, inconsistency, schoolboy wit.

The element of put-on, play, and "obviousness" has always played a central role in Godard's cinematic style. But many Godard lovers, especially in dealing with a "serious" and "beautiful" film like *VIVRE SA VIE*, often deal with the film as if the foolishness, intrusions, and obviousness were just not there. When I analyze *VIVRE SA VIE*, I find in there three types of humor that characterize all Godard's films from *BREATHLESS* to *NUMERO DEUX* (the latest Godard film I have seen). First, Godard uses humor which contributes to and is used fully within a "realist" narrative flow. [\(2\)](#) Second, Godard uses a contrasting kind of humor. This humor specifically creates or contributes to narrative disjuncture, often for a Brechtian-style, politicized, distanciation effect. Finally, much of

Godard's humor resides in, refers to or comments on the cinema's surface, especially if we consider both the audio and visual elements of that surface "sonimage." (3)

HUMOR WITHIN THE NARRATIVE FLOW

In terms of the film's pacing, long sections of *VIVRE SA VIE* inform us about what is happening to the protagonist, Nana, or what she is thinking traditional narrative tasks. Yet these segments often have the pacing of visual or verbal shaggy dog stories. For example, several pinball games and a billiard game are played out at length. These games have a diegetic justification that is, the narrative has provided the characters with a reasons be in that place playing that game. The game they play, in fact, corresponds to their psychological state at the moment. But the noise of the play is very loud, as are the ambient sounds. And the games are filmed with no tension as to who is to win or lose.

Similarly, Nana's conversations with most of the men she meets are either banal or foolish. Paul talks about some English lessons Nana had dropped in dialogue the banality of which matches similar lines from Ionesco's *THE BALD SOPRANO*. Paul tells a story about a chicken's soul, as it had been written by a schoolchild ("poule" being French slang for prostitute): "If you strip away outside, you see the inside; and if you strip away the inside, you see the soul." With an equally banal visual depiction within the film, Nana meets and sleeps with a journalist who promised to take pictures of her that she could use "to get into the movies"; with him, she talks about her five brothers and sisters and the kind of car he has "an Alfa Romeo," he says, "are you interested in cars?" Later, as a prostitute, she complains to her pimp Raoul about his making her late to the movies, and when he is selling her to other men toward the end of the film, her new pimps also talk about things like how long you have to wait on line on weekends to get into a cinema.

The content of her conversation with real-life philosopher, Brice Parain, the duration of that sequence, and the way it filmed all set it apart as something very different from her conversations with other men. In fact, we are charmed by Parain, as charmed as he seems to be by Nana. The content of the conversation seems close to Godard's own philosophic and aesthetic concerns, and the camera in this sequence respectfully lingers on the listener and questioner, a woman, as well as on the man. In this aspect, the sequence is not humorous at all, except in the bathos of Parain's description of the Dumas character Porthos' death. What is witty overall is the way that Godard films this fatherly man's lined face and his attentiveness to Nana, who had asked Parain to buy her a drink. Parain is not only made to seem so considerate and human and "real" in contrast to the other male figures in the film but we can also see the element of flirtation and sexuality involved in the discourse. Wooing a woman by philosophy has been many an older man's path to her body as well as to her soul. Furthermore, philosophical ideas in cinema are not usually expressed by a female protagonist to a male of Parain's intellectual stature, and not usually expressed by a lower-class character of either sex to a petit-bourgeois intellectual. That Parain is a real-life philosopher, expressing both his own philosophical ideas and Godard's wit in this fiction, and that he is shot in deep focus with his lined face seemingly so physically "real" these tactics add a gentle dimension of wit. Godard makes Parain's encounter with Nana significantly one of the

most "seductive" moments in cinema. In terms of realist cinematic narrative structuring, the guarantees of authenticity are greater here than anywhere else in the film. Parain is "real"; the tone of the conversation is "sincere"; and Nana has her fullest opportunity in the film to speak, think, and openly express her soul.

If that section depended on spoken verbal cohesiveness to express Nana's soul, another long sequence used the written word wittily to express the social conditions and class position shaping Nana's "mind." Before taking up with Raoul as a pimp, Nana is shown writing out a letter to a madame applying for a job in a brothel. We see the letter in close-up laboriously being written out in its entirety, with a juvenile sincerity of expression and an obvious misspelling ("ladresse" instead of "l'adresse"). Additionally, Nana interrupts her writing to measure herself with her hands, as one would measure a horse. Part of the wit and also the tension from this sequence comes from its duration, and part comes from our confusion as to Nana's intent, since the naiveté of the letter's content contrasts with the harsh reality of the proposed work.

Several shorter sequences also use a wit that contributes to the narrative flow rather than interfere with it: When Nana is in a cafe with her friend Yvette, a jukebox plays a song heard in its entirety about the difficulties of a working class couple's romance. When Nana is with her lover, in the only satisfying romantic affair in the film, romantic emotion is carried by music, and words become relegated to subtitles. Nana's banal discourse now conveys the everyday kind of small things she can share with a lover, even a request to go to the Louvre. If the young man's response, "No, I hate looking at pictures," is an overobvious joke within a film, its wit becomes buried in the overall romantic flow of the scene as a whole.

HUMOR FOR DISJUNCTURE

More memorable in terms of the film's narrative wit are the ways that Godard achieves disjuncture, often in a deliberately Brechtian way. (4) Like Brecht, he uses intertitles, often to sum up the action or an attitude. Unlike Brecht, Godard has made these intertitles witty in their grammatical and tonal inconsistency, the effect of which is to comment on contrasting modes of expression, states of consciousness, and levels on social, economic, and psychological causality. Here are some of the intertitles from the film, where I think the contrasting modes of discourse will stand out without further common comment: (5)

- I: un bistrot--Nana veut abandonner Paul--l'appareil a sous*
- II: le magasin de disques--deux mille francs--Nana vit sa vie*
- III: la concierge--Paul--la passion de Jeanne d'Arc--un journaliste*
- V: les boulevards extérieurs--le premier homme--la chambre*
- VI: rencontre avec Yvette--un café de banlieue--Raoul--mitraille de dehors*
- VII: les après-midi--l'argent--les lavabos--le plaisir--les hôtels*
- IX: un jeune homme--Luigi--Nana se demande si elle est heureuse*
- X: le trottoir--un type--le bonheur n'est pas gai*
- XI: place du Chatelet--l'inconnu--Nana fait de la philosophie sans le savoir*

Other ways that the film comments in aesthetically and politically significant ways on modes of discourse are the following: the presentation of Raoul's pimp-ledger, the sequence where Raoul shows Nana Parisian prostitution, and the sequence using Godard's own voice-off to read from Poe's "The Oval Portrait." All these sequences deal with men's manipulation of and control over women by men and about modes of discourse that express and embody that manipulation and control. Just after Nana has written to the Madame soliciting employment, Raoul, who saw Nana do this, shows her his ledger of a week's business and tells her he can make her rich. The ledger is shown in close-up and is laughable, written in an uneducated script:

<i>Vendredi</i>	
<i>Lilianne</i>	
<i>Yvette</i>	17
<i>Germaine IIII</i>	4
<i>Monique</i>	17
<i>16 chambres</i>	590
<i>Nuit</i>	38 pases
<i>646</i>	

This close-up of Raoul's accounts indicates how little the pimp had to know to impress Nana but also that prostitution is indeed a business. In this case, Godard depicts Raoul's pimping as a primitive small enterprise within Paris' economy, in which Raoul exists the lowest end of the *petite bourgeoisie*.

In the documentary sequences where Raoul introduces Nana to her trade, Godard actually filmed Paris prostitutes from a moving car. He showed things like money changing hands. In voice-off, Nana asks questions as she were a reporter, and Raoul answers as if he had taken on the role of a sociologist. His commentary, in fact, came from a newspaper article on the subject of prostitution, always a popular topic for journalistic expose. In its Brechtian aspect, this sequence both distances us from the emotional arena, i.e., Nana's problems, and acts as an implicit commentary on how long we have had the media muckraking these social "blights." Such information made public has hardly changed the situation. Traditional documentary exposes have lacked the imagination of poetry and fiction to explore the feelings and states of consciousness of prostitutes and the structures of their lives. In this film, the documentary section comes within a fiction about a woman who, in spite of being oppressed and in prostitution, wants to "live her life." For that reason, this sequence serves the same function of criticizing cinematic and journalistic naturalism as did Brecht's criticism of social protest drama in his time.

In the romantic love sequence mentioned previously, a young man sits in a chair, his face hidden behind a book. He tells the story of Poe's "The Oval Portrait." The voice heard is clearly Godard's; Poe's story has particular relevance it's about an artist who kills his wife as she becomes material for his art. As that long quotation is read during the love sequence, it has the effect of preventing audience identification and forcing viewers into a critical distance from the eroticism inherent in the moment. Beyond that, the story can be interpreted as a reference to Godard's manipulation of Anna Karina as

an actress in his films. *VIVRE SA VIE* is "romantic." It stands as a film director's homage to his actress-wife's beauty. It is also an idealist depiction of a prostitute spiritually seeking "to live her own life." Godard takes that romanticism one step further as he uses the Poe story, translated by Baudelaire, to comment on the romanticism of much of his own filmmaking project at that time to live in a world of pure cinema, to capture the moment in its most fleeting aspect, and to use improvisation and rapid filming to seize unexpected "truths" from performances. In particular, the Poe story comments on the sexual politics of the romantic artistic tradition, especially male romantic artists' depictions of the Woman, Art, Love, and Death as if there were a necessary relation between them.

On the level of dialogue and incident, unexpected occurrences interrupt expectation. Luigi, a friend of Raoul's, pretends to blow up and pop a balloon to distract Nana from wanting to go to the movies with Raoul. In another sequence, machine gun fire is followed by a bloodied man coming into a bar, which causes Nana to flee. On another occasion, Nana ditches a man who said he had paid her way into a film (it was Dreyer's *PASSION DE JEANNE D'ARC*, which had caused Nana to weep; its intertitle, *LA MORT*, foreshadows Nana's own death).

At the end of the film, Nana is shot in tacky surroundings, all in long shot as in a Rossellini film; and the foolish last lines insure the de-dramatization of that action leading to her death. She is not shot and killed by the first man shooting at Raoul but by the second. The last spoken lines of the film are these: "You shoot. I forgot to put cartridges in."

SURFACE CINEMATOGRAPHIC HUMOR: AUDIO

The audio surface of the film has both narratively "realistic" sounds and sounds that interfere with the narrative flow. Both kinds of sounds often draw attention to themselves. Pinball-machine noise, chairs moving, glasses clinking, voices from nearby patrons, traffic sounds, and juke-box music all this "fills up" many of the numerous cafe sequences so that the dialogue often must compete with the ambient noise. In addition, Michel Legrand's romantic music swells to crescendos that movingly convey the state of Nana's "soul"; but that music is often abruptly edited to silence.

Nana may be a part-time philosopher, but often her repetition of phrases sounds like a child's repeating something to test out its sound. "What's it to you?" she repeats four times to Paul as the film opens, or "I'm responsible," she keeps repeating to Yvette.

Furthermore, in addition to "The Oval Portrait" sequence, there are other literary quotations. They may serve somewhat the same purpose as the Poe citation, to comment on a whole mode of discourse, but they usually seem more capriciously inserted. Nana tells the arresting policemen lines from Rimbaud, "Je est un autre," in which she not only expresses romantic alienation but changes her sex to a masculine "other." Later, beginning to work for Raoul on the Champs-Élysées, when she asks when she'll start, the voice-off commentary answers with Baudelaire's famous lines about the despairing

Paris at nightfall. Earlier in the record store, Nana's co-worker had read to her a popular romance, a "stupid story" that was supposed to be "pretty well-written."

Often these audio variations become combined with other "documentary" elements that add further complexity. Godard's voice enters in to tell the Poe story; Parain plays himself; and in the bar where the jukebox plays the song about working class love, for the cognoscenti the man seen hanging around the juke box is the song's real composer, Jean Ferrat.

VISUAL WIT

Godard uses visual humor in *VIVRE SA VIE* to challenge audience expectations about narrative flow. "Brechtian" is often more appropriate to describe his style than just "wit." Both through obviousness and a constant barrage of filmic jokes, Godard characteristically, in all his films, demands that the audience attend to editing style, off-beat framing and composition, stylized camera movements, and the filmed Paris milieu as much as to the emotional or didactic aspects of his films. Most obviously, Brecht's influence is felt in the intertitles or in the shots that depict prostitution, the latter often being the equivalent of a *Gestus* in Brecht's terms, that is, a tableau-like moment that sums up the social forces operative in a given situation or in a given moment of a character's consciousness.

Clearly, *VIVRE SA VIE* does aim for both an emotional and didactic impact. The music, Karina's beauty, Nana's existential determination to live her life, her pathos and her joy these are dominant elements, emphasized in sequences where Nana's character is developed emotionally. But even in these sequences, the emotionally "strong" ones, odd elements demand our attention.

Consider, for example, the close-ups of Karina. In the ones under the credits, she wets her lips, possibly in nervousness. Godard often used the "bad takes" he shot. In many interviews, he discussed how he liked to use professional actors but catch them in their off moments. When Nana is in the police station, and we see her face in close-up as she is interrogated, we also see a large window knob oddly placed in a prominent position to the right of her face. The reverse shot, a close-up of the round-faced policeman interrogating her, enhances that visual interplay between character and background which has now become obtrusive. The camera angles up and frames him so that his chin just looms up just above a large old typewriter, and behind him to the left we see a strange photo on the wall containing a hand and arm in the foreground and people on chairs in the background.

Later, in the sequence at the cinema, we wonder why Nana consents to a man's putting his arm around her. Here the editing moves from a lateral view of this "pick-up" in long shot to close-ups of the crying Falconetti and then a frontal close-up of Nana crying (no background shown). The "heaviness" of all this, as well as the combination of shots, could be considered humorous as well as pathetic, since the foreshadowing is so "obvious", especially in the fade out that ends the sequence on Dryer's intertitle, DEATH.

In "The Oval Portrait" sequence, a very romantic one, the young man's lips are not moving although he is supposed to be reading aloud; he just holds the Poe book, tide shown, up to his face. Most of the sequence consists of Godard's voice heard over long-held close-ups of Karina. But what do we see in the background in the lower left corner of the frame? Intrusively, there is a small, rather banal, publicity still of the young Elizabeth Taylor, identifiable because of her barely visible mole. Our eye is constancy drawn to this photo, framed with a white border around it. It functions within the cinematic frame as yet another isolated capturing of a conventionally beautiful woman whose beauty is seemingly ahistorical and timeless. We strain to recognize what that "other woman" is, and only the intense narrative and verbal cohesiveness of the sound track and our biographical interest in that sound track (about a portrait painter) keeps the inserted photo from being noticed "too much." Significantly, in the reviews of *VIVRE SA VIE*, these distancing tactics which Godard uses in creating close-ups of Karina were never mentioned only Karina's great beauty, the pathos of Nana's plight, or the heroism of Nana's spiritual independence, which these close-ups were said to express.

When I first saw *VIVRE SA VIE*, the film introduced me to the notion that marriage and prostitution were the same women giving away their bodies for financial support, with the fact of marriage keeping them from being trained in other ways of making a living or of living one's life. Maybe Godard learned the idea from Frederick Engels, maybe from 19th century French novelists, but to women in the 60s and early 70s, that political idea seemed to need both restating and elaborating. Furthermore, in the 70s I wrote my thesis on Godard's films and he is still important to me for this because I saw in his work a primer of didactic filmmaking. But now in 1980, since Godard's narrative innovations have been creatively absorbed by so many other filmmakers, who like me "teethed" on Godard's work, and since my own and other women's political theory has gone beyond the simple equations postulated in this film, what still appeals to me most about *VIVRE SA VIE* are the zany elements, the ones that do not fit in, the ones I cannot exactly remember from viewing to viewing. And these are particularly the elements of visual wit.

I like seeing so much of Karina's hair from the back. I like the use of symmetrical or almost symmetrical compositions. In the opening sequences, Nana's back is filmed slightly off to one side so we can see her reflection, but we wait a long time to see her former husband, Paul's face. Does This Mean Something or not? It is a tactic also used in *LE GAI SAVOIR*. All we can say is that sometime the tactic has a particular meaning about the filming of women, but other times it does not. In that sequence I pay most attention of all to the man and woman working behind the counter, it pleases me that Godard chose to film all the reflections in the espresso machines and different mirrors there. Similarly, in the sequence where Raoul "buys" Nana's services and becomes her pimp, our attention is constancy drawn to the background, a huge photomural of the Champs-Elysses during the day, which gives the planimetric shot an illusion of dizzying depth. Then, the sequence following this is supposed to be Nana's first night working for Raoul (heard in her question in voice off, "When do I start?"). But all we see is a shot sequence of the Champs-Elysses at night, filmed at a lower angle than and in a direction that is the mirror reverse of the photomural. Over this is read, by Raoul, the Baudelaire quotation.

Two "action" sequences in the film illustrate that the film's vitality often derives mainly from visual wit. One is the machine gun sequence. The camera had been panning around the cafe. Abruptly with the sound of the gun, the pan is edited in staccato jump cuts. When the bloodied man comes in (blood is always excessive and thus funny in Godard's films), we had just witnessed some figures in a ploy with guns in the background. The latter action element was filmed through the translucent (just plain dirty?) cafe door, and the bloodied man who had staggered up to the counter is framed far left, his face half in and half out of the frame. Outside the cafe, Nana is filmed running left, up the street, in a planimetric composition at a right angle to the camera (a characteristic Godard shot); in the same shot, she is passed by a number of gendarmes going in the opposite direction, presumably toward the scene of the "crime". There are few indications of action in the sequence, and the ones we have are undercut in their "seriousness" or tension by the playfulness of the graphic design.

Similarly, audiences always laugh at the concierge sequence because of the cinematic style. First, Nana enters and leaves and reenters a door to a courtyard, with no explanation given as to why. She is filmed coming in, camera at eye-level; when the action is repeated, the audience laughs. Then there is a voyeuristic shot from a pitched angle looking down at her difficulties as if we were in the position of tenants on the second floor. Nana tries to get her key and is prevented bodily from going to her room by the concierge and the concierge's grown son. The acute diagonal of the composition dislocates us, and in the left hand corner of the frame, a small child keeps demonstrating the hoola-hoop to another child who stands reactionless and still. There is great visual tension in the shot, as well as wit. As the young man shoves Nana out, the cinematic dislocation fits the theme and plot.

All humor is tendentious, Freud said. Much of the visual humor in *Vivre sa vie* both works against what we expect and it gives pleasure, but it is also just cinematic fooling around. It may seem like an elitist humor. However, the lines from Poe, Rimbaud, and Baudelaire are part of the standard French high-school curriculum. Shifts in tone work on everyone whether or not they recognize the source of the humor.

Godard's films offer both visual lessons about narrative film structure and also "pointless" jokes in an aleotropic mode. The randomness, looseness, and nonchalance found by critics when Godard's films first came out hardly seem so "loose" now. It is still perhaps Godard's low-budget clowning and his joking about cinematic process that give a film like this its freshness, a freshness that remains after the film is no longer considered revolutionary in terms of politics or style. Some of us keep wanting to see Godard films over and over and keep wanting to teach them. I suspect it is because we like and want to get the students to like the combination of politics and jokes. We may even fall into the trap, as I have here, of wanting to explain the joke.

Is explaining the joke so bad? Here once again, Godard has upset a cultural norm--for "explaining the joke" in his work of necessity makes the explainer into both a cinematically and a politically aware teacher. Godard's wit teaches me, and by giving this paper, I demonstrate that I still clearly find it useful to use Godard's films, and especially his wit, to teach the things about film that I want to teach.

CONCLUSION

Elsewhere I have written about the political seriousness of *VIVRE SA VIE*. (6) Its status as a work that comments on ideology, class, sexual politics, and art is unquestioned in my mind. I cannot, however, force all its disjunctures into a Brechtian mode. Nor do I want to. Even so, much of the wit is Brechtian. That is, the cinematic with uses humor's distancing capacity to reveal and comment upon social processes. With this film Godard stated that he wanted to be Brechtian, and certainly he invented many new cinematic equivalents for alienation effects. He uses his art here to analyze, openly and directly, relations between economic, social, psychological, and artistic structures. To this end, the obviousness of his humor and his delight in cinematographic and narrative plays serve him well. What characterizes Godard's style from *BREATHLESS* to the present is the very open manipulation of whatever joke it is which he has to offer us. That joking is not always political in intent, but when it is, it easily becomes a didactic tool. Subtlety is not Godard's *metier*, nor was it Brecht's. For, as Brecht said in *The Messingkauf*, "Whoever wants an unobtrusive lesson really does not want a lesson at all." (7)

NOTES

1. Julia Lesage, *Jean-Luc Godard: A Guide to References and Resources* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1979), pp. 137-142. [back](#)
2. I use "realist" here in the sense in which Roland Barthes described Balzac's "Sarrasine" in *S/Z*, and in the sense in which "the classical realist film text" has been analyzed in contemporary film theory. [back](#)
3. *Sonimage* is the name of Godard and Anne-Marie Mieville's studio, and it also refers to Godard's repeated definition of cinema as sound and image. [back](#)
4. Julia Lesage, "The Films of Jean-Luc Godard and Their Use of Brechtian Dramatic Theory," Ph.D. Dissertation, Indiana University, 1976. [back](#)
5. Jean-Luc Godard, *L'Avant Scene du Cinema: VIVRE SA VIE*. No. 19 (October 1962). [back](#)
6. Lesage, "The Films of Jean-Luc Godard..." [back](#)
7. Bertolt Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1965) [back](#)